

*Written testimony submitted to
the Appropriations Committees on
HB 6659: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM
ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.*

February 23, 2023

Co-Chairs Senator Osten and Representative Walker; Ranking Members Senator Berthel and Representative Nuccio; and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee:

My name is Father James Manship. I am the pastor of St. Rose of Lima parish, Meriden, CT, a leader in CONECT- Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut. Our parish serves a mixed community, reflective of the changing diversity of our city and state.

I write to you in opposition to HB 6659, as the governor's budget does not reflect the need to equitably fund the education of children in our state. As a state, our responsibility to educate our children is important to our short- and long-term future. Much has been accomplished, but much more needs to be done, even more so, as we come out of the pandemic.

We continue to fail to eliminate the achievement gap between black and brown children and their white counterparts. The greater inclusion of parents in the education of their children will be enhanced if teachers can be recruited and retained that reflect the community of the children they are teaching. Increase funding to public education will ensure that the state will have graduates of our public schools who are ready to continue their education, enroll in trade training programs, or enter the workforce. A comprehensive approach to address these demands, requires a long-term plan and financial support.

Since the Meskill decision, our state has failed to address the inequitable funding of public schools based on property taxes. In one of the most prosperous states in the nation, Connecticut continues to be one of the most segregated by wealth/race, de facto segregated unequal schools. Meriden serves our neighboring communities by providing a hospital, many nursing homes, warehouses, a state sanctioned marijuana dispensary, manufacturers, and cheap labor. Our schools and outcomes for our children are nothing in comparison to towns like Cheshire, Wallingford, and Southington, because of the inequitable state education cost sharing formula. (HB5003, I believe addresses this unjust situation.)

The 2 years of the pandemic has resulted in an across the board loss of 20 years of advancement in standardized test scores for all schools. But this loss is all the more harmful in school systems, like Meriden, whose students, nearly 58% Hispanic, were already behind in standardized test scores for language arts and mathematics.

Nothing short of increased instructional time is what is demanded to recover what has been loss during the pandemic. Nothing short of a just educational cost sharing formula will permit school systems, like Meriden, to carry out the structural changes to eliminate the achievement gap between Cheshire and Meriden children.

This is the moment when a “Marshall Plan” is needed for our public schools. This is the moment for Connecticut to step up to address the unjust public-school funding system based on property taxes. Short term, patchwork solutions, and emergent reactionary responses to this unjust funding system must be met with the bold action, that HB 6659 misses.

Almost weekly, as the pastor of St. Rose of Lima, I see new families arriving into our community with children for whose first language is not English. Our families choose Meriden because of an ample supply of apartments, with relatively lower rents than that the surrounding towns, like Cheshire, Wallingford, Southington, Berlin, Middletown, and Middlebury. Despite the increasing need for language arts, the Meriden Schools have been essentially flat funded for more than 10 years, placing Meriden as the second lowest funded school district in Connecticut.

As the pastor of St. Rose of Lima, I know young people who have graduated from the Meriden schools, and found themselves struggling to do basic math in our community colleges, and unable to express themselves well in English. Despite the high grades they received, these former students of the Meriden school system, find the education they received in Meriden is not the same as their counterparts in Southington, Cheshire, and Wallingford. The ability to fully participate in the economic and civic life in Connecticut of these young people from our parish and community have been greatly diminished.

Our Meriden School Board and Superintendent find themselves between a rock and a hard place. While the decision to essentially flat fund our school system for more than 10 years has harmed our students, prevented substantive structural changes to Meriden public schools (for example diversifying teacher recruitment, retaining teachers, and providing a dual language program), and caused the Meriden school system to rely on grant funding (which provide only short-term programing, limited in long-term effectiveness), the tax payers of Meriden cannot bear the huge increases needed to address these needs that have arisen over the years, let alone to cover the costs to retain nearly 140 positions presently funded by the American Recovery Pandemic Act-ARPA.

I’m asking you to vote “NO” on H.B. 6659: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR.

The governor’s proposed budget fails to:

- Address longstanding injustice. Connecticut spends \$788 million more educating white students than students of color, even though our student population is now slightly more than 50% students of color. The racial funding gap is growing, and we need to close it.*
- Unify our education system. Public schools should be funded fairly based on need.*
- Make up for lost funding. Districts will lose more than \$1 billion when federal COVID relief runs out. We can’t treat temporary funds like a permanent solution.*

I'm asking you to help make Connecticut a more just and equitable place to educate our children and live for our families. The governor's budget must address the unjust property tax-based education funding, so municipalities, like Meriden, can close the achievement gap.

Thank you for your leadership on this important issue.

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